

Ritual as a Teaching Method: An Embodied Teaching Approach for Enhancing the Participation in Family Sociology Course

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Abstract: *There is a common problem in humanities and social sciences courses, which is the lack of classroom interaction and low student participation. In the Family Sociology course, students' familiarity with the family actually creates cognitive barriers, making it difficult for them to form sociological imagination. This paper proposes "ritual as a teaching method", enabling students to perform wedding ceremonies from different historical periods and cultures through cross-temporal role-playing, and designs a complete research-performance-reflection process. Practice shows that this plan significantly enhances students' multi-dimensional course participation and achieves a transformation from passive acceptance to active construction. The paper suggests that role-playing based on rituals provides a feasible path for deepening participation in social science courses. Its core strategies of finding structural carriers, designing embodied presentation, and promoting cognitive improvement through comparative discussions can be extended to other humanities and social sciences courses, providing practical references for solving the problem of shallow participation.*

Keywords: *Family Sociology, Course Participation, Embodied Teaching, Role-Playing, Ritual*

1. Introduction

At present, humanities and social sciences courses in universities generally face the teaching difficulties of high absenteeism, low participation, and shallow learning. Classroom silence among college students has become a common phenomenon in various universities, seriously affecting the quality of undergraduate education ^[1]. Classroom silence among college students refers to a psychological state and behavior of students at the individual level in classroom teaching activities, which is not related to the teaching content and requirements and does not participate ^[2]. This phenomenon of classroom silence fundamentally is a problem of insufficient participation in college courses. Studies have found that the factors affecting the participation of undergraduate courses are diverse, and each student weighs various factors in a complex way when deciding whether to speak up in class ^[3]. Compared to how teachers "teach", stimulating, maintaining, and enhancing students' learning motivation and designing high-involvement student learning processes can help improve course participation ^[4].

Family Sociology, as a core course for students majoring in sociology, focuses on families. Although families are highly relevant to students' daily life experiences, precisely because of this familiarity, there is a special cognitive disorder. Students often directly equate their personal family experiences with general social facts, substituting common sense for knowledge, and using personal experiences to obscure structural analysis, making it difficult for them to enter the disciplinary thinking of sociology. The traditional teaching mode based on teacher lectures compresses family sociology knowledge into theoretical knowledge such as concept definitions, theoretical schools, and institutional descriptions. Even if real-life cases and life experiences are added, it is difficult to stimulate students' learning motivation. Most students are passively accepting and mechanically memorizing, and the knowledge quickly fades after the exam. How to enable students to truly enter the thinking mode of family sociology? The key lies in enhancing students' participation in the course, achieving a paradigm shift from empirical cognition to sociological imagination within the context of classroom learning. This is the core proposition of the teaching reform for Family Sociology.

In recent years, concepts such as participatory teaching and embodied teaching have increasingly

gained attention in university classroom teaching reforms. Participatory teaching is not only a teaching philosophy but also a teaching method. It advocates centering on students' learning, emphasizing equality and joint participation between teachers and students, and achieving interaction and mutual growth in teaching activities^[5]. Participatory teaching emphasizes the dominant position of students in classroom teaching, and through various modes such as discussion teaching, situational teaching, and online teaching, it stimulates students' participation enthusiasm. Research has found that after constructing the legitimate identity of learners in the context through scenario creation, through more refined design, everyone can "more or less" and "responsibly" participate in the interaction of the context, which is the key to making the context enable learning^[6]. The embodied cognition theory emphasizes that cognition is not a pure mental activity detached from the body, but deeply rooted in the interaction between the body and the environment^[7]. Introducing the embodied cognition concept into the teaching of sociology courses and achieving the integration of situational teaching and embodied teaching is the teaching attempt made in this research.

Specifically, by having students become actors of families under specific historical social conditions and experiencing the initial stage of family formation and the core family system through role-playing, experiencing the shaping power of the system on people and people's active response to the system, it is possible to break through the limitations of the traditional lecture mode and achieve deep participation in the cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions. However, although role-playing has been applied in social science education, the systematic application of wedding ceremony performance as an embodied teaching strategy in the Family Sociology research is still limited. Based on this, this paper takes "cross-temporal role-playing of wedding ceremonies" as the core teaching intervention means, aiming to explore a path of embodied teaching that enhances the participation of students in Family Sociology.

2. Teaching Design of "Ritual as a Teaching Method"

2.1. Course Background and Participants

This teaching practice was implemented in Family Sociology of the sociology major at a certain university. This course is a compulsory specialized course for sociology majors, targeting undergraduate students in their third year of study. Approximately 70 students chose to take this course. The total class hours for the course are 32 (2 class hours per week for 16 weeks), mainly covering topics such as the historical changes of family systems, marriage, family relationships and structures, family functions, and contemporary family changes. Students have completed prerequisite courses such as Introduction to Sociology and Methods of Social Research, and possess basic sociological concepts and thinking abilities.

This teaching intervention was arranged during the middle stage of the course. At this point, students had completed the learning of basic theoretical knowledge of Family Sociology and knowledge related to marriage, mastered the core concepts related to family development and marriage, and had the knowledge reserves to conduct research on wedding ceremonies.

2.2. Grouping Scheme and Topic Design

The students were divided into 9 groups, with each group consisting of 6 to 8 people. Each group was assigned a task related to the research and performance of a wedding ceremony. The grouping followed the principles of diversity in time and space coverage as well as diversity in institutional types, aiming to cover diverse family institutional forms from different eras, ethnic groups, and regions, and to focus on the ritual and symbolic meanings of weddings. The grouping was formed by the students freely combining themselves, and the teacher made minor adjustments based on factors such as gender and personality to ensure the heterogeneity and collaboration potential of each group.

Students were required to independently consult literature, write scripts, prepare simple costumes and props, and recreate the key scenes of the wedding ceremony on the spot in class. This stage transformed abstract concepts of family sociology, such as "rituals and identity redefinition", "family roles", and "the transmission of family power", into practical cognitive experiences for the students.

The selected topics and their corresponding core sociological issues were as follows: Song Dynasty weddings, Mosuo walking marriage, early People's Republic of China weddings, modern Shanghai weddings, contemporary "barefoot marriage" in China, Spanish weddings, Irish weddings, Dai weddings, and Tibetan weddings.

The 9 group topics covered different types of wedding forms from traditional to contemporary, as

well as wedding ceremonies under different cultural traditions of China and the West, forming an analytical path from traditional rupture and transformation to contemporary different cultural practices.

2.3. Implementation Process

The teaching intervention was divided into six stages and was completed within 20 class hours.

The first stage was theoretical research. After the teacher completed the basic theory lectures, each group proceeded to the data reading phase. The teacher provided some materials, including academic papers, excerpts from original literature, ethnographic fragments, and video materials, with most of the materials to be collected by the students themselves. Each group needed to complete the reading within two weeks and clearly define the complete process and social functions of the wedding ceremony to be performed next.

The second stage was script creation. Each group created a 15-20-minute performance script. The script consisted of three levels: (a) character dialogues and action instructions; (b) academic narration interspersed at key nodes to explain the sociological meaning of the ceremony's sections; (c) character descriptions, writing biographies for each character.

The third stage was rehearsal and guidance. Each group conducted independent rehearsals outside of class, and the teacher provided mid-term guidance, focusing on checking the completeness of the ceremony, the accuracy of the academic narration, and whether the character performances conform to the historical/sociological settings.

The fourth stage was classroom performance. Each group performed in turn. The non-performing groups observed, recorded, and reflected on the most confusing or shocking part of the ceremony, the family power structure it reflected, and how it differed from the weddings you were familiar with.

The fifth stage was comparative discussion. The teacher led a class discussion organized around the comparison of the nine wedding ceremonies. The class began by asking who held the power in each wedding performance and how those power structures shifted across historical periods. They also examined what bodily postures and symbolic objects, such as the red veil, the fire basin, the betrothal gifts, revealed about social norms and how rituals worked on participants' bodies. The discussion then moved to economic exchanges: what did dowries and gifts tell us about family relationships and the economic logic underneath? Some elements of weddings had persisted across centuries, and others had disappeared. The class tried to figure out why. They also considered how weddings, as rites of passage, performed the work of transforming identity in different social contexts, and whether contemporary weddings still do this work. Toward the end, the discussion pushed further: what structural forces, including economic systems, political arrangements, religious traditions, or kinship rules, ultimately explained the differences they had observed? And how did these forces get acted out and reinforced through the details of ritual?

The sixth stage was group reflection. Each group student submitted a reflection report of the group members, requiring them to dialogue between personal experience and course concepts.

The activity was introduced to students as an academic exercise rather than value advocacy. For students who felt uncomfortable with public performance, alternative roles, such as narrator or production support, were made available. Students were also informed that they could withdraw from performance roles at any point.

2.4. Evaluation Design

This teaching intervention's evaluation adopted a combination of process evaluation and summative evaluation. The evaluation entities included teacher evaluation (script, performance presentation and reflection report) and peer assessment (performance presentation, observation record and questioning). Among them, the teacher evaluation accounted for 60% and the peer assessment accounted for 40%. The final score served as the students' regular performance in the course. The evaluation criteria for each group's performance by the teacher focused on the depth of the dialogue between experience and theory, encouraging students to express sincerely rather than conforming to standard answers.

3. Implementation Effect and Feedback

3.1. Student Participation

From classroom observations, it could be seen that each group devoted a significant amount of extracurricular time to the theoretical research and script creation stages. Some groups actively contacted the teacher to discuss research ideas and consulted various materials, demonstrating a higher level of learning initiative beyond the requirements of regular courses. During the performance session, the attention of all students was significantly concentrated, and the classroom atmosphere was very lively, with a significant increase in student participation. The participation degree and depth of discussion in the comparative discussion session were significantly better than those in regular classroom teaching. Most students were able to establish connections between the performance experience and the concepts learned in the previous courses.

3.2. Students' Feedback

By analyzing the reflection reports submitted by the students, the following three themes stood out the most.

First, the understanding from symbols to meanings. The students noticed the overlooked details of the rituals. Many students mentioned that in order to accurately reproduce the ritual process, they first deeply understood the symbolic signs that they usually ignored, such as the red color of the veil, the direction of kneeling, the special items in the ritual, the changes in kinship terms during wedding ceremonies, etc. These symbols were just a sentence in the textbook, but they became issues that needed to be repeatedly confirmed and discussed during the rehearsals.

One student wrote: "What is the function of the veil? I originally thought it was for decoration, but when I played the role of the bride and covered my head, I realized that I couldn't see the way and could only be led by someone. Isn't this exactly the situation of the bride in the ritual? Unable to see, unable to be autonomous, led by others. A veil has objectified the entire gender order." Another student mentioned: "The covering of the bride during the ancient wedding, I originally thought it was just a custom. After researching, I learned that this action symbolizes that the bride transforms from an 'outsider' to a 'family member', and she must cover her face to be introduced to the husband's family. A single action has behind it a whole set of logical logic of kinship relations." Another student wrote: "When rehearsing crossing the fire pit, I was thinking what is the fire pit? It is a boundary. Crossing it means no longer being a member of the maternal family. The ritual uses symbols to make the transformation of identity very concrete."

Second, the shift from personal experience to social structure thinking. Some students reported that by playing the social roles in specific rituals, they experienced a shift from personal experience to thinking about social structures.

One student wrote: "After performing the Mosuo walking marriage, I truly understood that 'the kinship system can be different'. When you really enter the logic of that role, you realize it is alive." Another student said: "I originally thought the dowry was just something for our family and for me personally. But when I performed the contemporary bare marriage, I could see the different reactions of everyone. I realized that this is not just an individual matter, but the economic structure of the entire society is changing."

Third, the deepening of classroom participation from "passively listening" to "actively doing". Some students reported changes in their learning methods and attitudes, expressing their interest in classroom participation.

One student said: "Previously, in class, it was just listening. Whether to listen or not was up to me. But this time was different. I needed to look up information, needed to figure it out by myself, and then had to perform it to let others understand. During this process, the knowledge became mine." Another student wrote: "Previously, my impression of marriage and family was just a common phenomenon in life. Now I have a deeper understanding. This gain is not only in terms of professional knowledge, but also in terms of the value guidance for the path of life." One student said: "Our group spent several hours searching on the Internet for a detail of the wedding. This feeling of actively trying to figure it out was something I didn't have before." Another student said: "I felt this form of classroom was very interesting. It was a vivid practice of textbook knowledge."

3.3. Problems Encountered in Practice

During the performance, some notable issues emerged. Firstly, there was an entertainment-oriented tendency among some groups. For instance, certain groups overly focused on achieving comedic effects, thereby undermining the seriousness and academic nature of the rituals. Secondly, a few introverted students withdrew from participating, and a small number of students resisted performing on stage, resulting in significantly lower participation levels compared to the other members of the same group. These problems need to be addressed specifically in the subsequent teaching process.

4. Reflection and Insights

4.1. Reflection on Theory and Practice

The core assumption of this teaching practice was that rituals, as a teaching method, could facilitate students' deep understanding of abstract sociological concepts through an embodied participation process. From the perspective of implementation results, this assumption has been preliminarily verified.

Embodied cognition theory posits that cognition is embodied. It depends on the body, which shapes cognitive styles, thinking, and the mind ^[8]. In traditional teaching, students acquire declarative knowledge about families through textbooks and lectures. These memorizable concepts and theories may not truly enter students' cognitive structure. One of the core findings of this teaching practice was that when students had to perform ritual actions with their own bodies, abstract concepts acquired concrete and perceptible carriers. The experiences students gained in the classroom closely matched what embodied cognition theory describes, that is body participation triggered understanding, rather than leaving the body and cognition separated.

The core of participatory teaching lies in enabling students to transform from passive recipients of knowledge to active constructors of knowledge. In this teaching practice, participation was not only reflected in the behavioral aspect of role-playing, but also in multiple stages of knowledge construction. Students needed to read literature, understand historical contexts, and convert abstract institutional logic into specific role actions. This process required them to use knowledge rather than merely memorize it, and participation occurred both inside and outside the classroom.

The reason why rituals become effective teaching tools is due to their structural concentration, symbolic readability, and reproducibility. Wedding rituals condense the core elements of family systems, including the essence of marriage, the distribution of power, the relationships among family members, and social exchanges. Students can present all of these elements in a short performance and see the overall family system of a society through a single ritual. Rituals use symbolic symbols as the basic means of expression, and these symbols have clear referents, making them suitable for sociological analysis. Moreover, rituals have fixed procedures and repeatable structures, making them naturally suitable for classroom performances. These characteristics together constitute the unique value of "ritual as a teaching method" and make rituals an effective bridge from experiential participation to structural understanding.

The deeper significance of this teaching practice lies in training students to think like sociologists. The "sociological imagination" as described by Mills ^[9] essentially refers to the ability to transform personal troubles into public issues and to connect micro-experiences with macro-structures. In traditional teaching, this ability often remains at the level of slogans. However, this teaching practice, through the embodied design of being an actor in the ritual, enabled students not only to experience how structures shape individuals from within the ritual, but also to observe how structures change from outside the ritual. From the inside to the outside, from perception to analysis, this is precisely the operational path of the sociological imagination.

4.2. Insights for Similar Courses

The humanities and social sciences courses often encounter a problem where students can memorize knowledge but do not know how to think and apply it. The crux of the issue lies in the fact that humanities and social sciences research often deals with rather abstract issues, such as systems, order, culture, etc., and traditional classrooms mostly rely on the "lecture" by teachers to convey these abstract contents. The innovative approach attempted in this article is to make the abstract things tangible through the presence of the body. Specifically, it involves finding a specific event that can encapsulate the core logic of the

discipline, allowing students to create it, enabling them to have an experience, and then elevating the experience to understanding. For example, courses related to history can select key historical events and have students form groups to play the roles of representatives from different camps, conducting decision-making simulations under given historical constraints. Similarly, courses in journalism and communication can simulate news conferences, crisis management, and interviews, with students taking on the roles of spokespersons, reporters, and parties involved, allowing them to personally experience how information asymmetry, differences in positions, and time pressure shape news production.

This approach can be applied to many humanities and social sciences courses. The key lies in finding the specific event that can incorporate the abstract logic and allowing students to encounter problems, make judgments, and bear consequences in their physical experiences, and then elevate these experiences to a disciplinary understanding through reflection and discussion.

5. Conclusion

Higher education bears significant responsibility for talent cultivation. The sociology major aims to train students who can integrate sociological theories and methods to analyze and explore actual social issues. It plays a role in providing professional services, solving social problems, and innovating social governance, becoming a new generation that cares about and serves society. This is the fundamental goal of the curriculum teaching in the sociology major. Family Sociology is not only one of the classic branches of sociology but also one of the core professional courses for students. Enhancing students' classroom participation is an important way to achieve good teaching goals.

This article takes the role-playing of wedding ceremony in the Family Sociology course as an example to explore an embodied teaching approach. When students perform the ritual actions with their own bodies, the concepts and theories originally in the textbooks gain a tangible carrier. The profound significance of this approach lies in the fact that it does not tell students what the social structure is, but allows students to discover it themselves in the process of becoming the actors of the ritual. Of course, this is only a preliminary attempt, and there are still some problems that need to be solved. But at least it points to a possibility. When abstract structures are difficult to be conveyed solely through text, having students encounter, feel, and analyze it in embodied experiences might be a feasible path for humanities and social sciences courses to break through the problem of shallow participation.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by the Teaching Fund Project of Tianjin University of Technology (Grant No. YB24-18): "Research on Innovative Approaches to Enhancing Students' Course Engagement: A Case Study of Family Sociology."

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